

Department of Neurology

Chronic Pain Syndrome

Chronic pain can feel like slow torture, making it difficult for you to go to work, exercise, or even take a shower and dress yourself.

If your pain is out of control, it can also take an emotional toll on you, undermining your self-esteem and coloring your outlook.

About chronic pain syndrome

Sometimes pain evolves into a poorly understood condition known as chronic pain syndrome. Unlike acute pain, this condition doesn't go away after your initial injury or illness has healed. It's marked by pain that lasts longer than six months and is often accompanied by anger and depression, anxiety, loss of sexual desire, and disability.

Chronic pain syndrome may occur along with conditions that involve long-term pain, including certain cancers, stroke, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, endometriosis, and inflammatory bowel disease. Experts don't yet understand how or even if these conditions are related.

Contrary to some opinion, research suggests that psychological problems alone are not behind chronic pain syndrome. Rather, the syndrome appears to be linked to abnormalities in the interaction between certain glands – the hypothalamus, pituitary, and adrenal glands – and the nervous system, known as a type of stress axis. The abnormalities seen in this stress axis, which controls our reactions to stress, injury, and trauma, may explain why certain people experience pain differently.

Studies have also found that people who suffer from chronic pain have abnormally low levels of endorphins in their spinal fluid. Endorphins are chemicals in the body that help to naturally control pain.

Symptoms of chronic pain syndrome

Symptoms vary from person to person, but may include any or a combination of:

- Low back pain
- Headaches
- Joint pain
- Muscle aches
- Burning or tingling pain in different parts of the body
- Jolts of sharp pain

Treating chronic pain syndrome

Medications aren't the only way to manage chronic pain, and they typically don't work when used alone. In most cases, you can better manage chronic pain syndrome with a combination of different therapies to reduce both pain and stress.

These are possible treatment options:

- Behavior modification, such as cognitive behavioral therapy
- Acupuncture
- Psychotherapy
- Biofeedback
- Hypnosis
- Occupational therapy
- Physical therapy
- Relaxation techniques, such as meditation, visual imagery, or deep breathing
- Medications to help control pain, such as anti-inflammatory drugs, antidepressants, anticonvulsants, and opioids
- Nerve blocks
- Surgery to treat any underlying conditions

Lifestyle changes and chronic pain

Lifestyle changes are often used to ease chronic pain, as well as physical and mental health problems that may come with it. Managing stress, for example, may help control your pain by improving your mood.

These are other ideas:

- Get regular, low-impact exercise, such as walking, cycling, swimming, or yoga.
- Get plenty of sleep on a consistent schedule.
- Avoid napping during the day.
- Quit smoking, if you smoke.

Getting up and moving around is one of the most important things you can do because *not moving* can result in additional pain and disability.

Although treatment and lifestyle changes can help reduce pain and allow you to resume many of your daily activities, these therapies often can't rid you of pain entirely. Working with your doctor to determine the appropriate treatment plan can help get your pain to a level that is bearable.
